

**National research on the postgraduate student experiences**

**Case presentation on career development and employability (Volume 3 of 3)**

Kinash, Shelley; Crane, Linda H; Bannatyne, Amy Jean; Judd, Madelaine-Marie; Stark, Ashley; Eckersley, Bill; Hamlin, Gary; Partridge, Helen; Udas, Ken

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# National research on the postgraduate student experience: Case presentation on career development and employability (Volume 3 of 3)

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## National Research on the Postgraduate Student Experience: Case Presentation

### VOLUME 3

#### ► CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY

<http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com>

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# PREFACE



This is volume three of three volumes of case studies to enhance the postgraduate student experience. The theme of this case study is:

**+ Career development and employability**

The other three case studies in this series are:

**+ Volume 1** - First year postgraduate student experiences

**+ Volume 2** - Postgraduate student diversity

This case study presentation on *career development and employability* is based on student engagement breakfasts, interviews and focus groups with 366 people across the stakeholder groups of postgraduate students, educators and university executives from 26 Australian institutions.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case presentation on career development and employability is grounded in Australian national research on postgraduate student experiences. This is not a typical or traditional case study, in that the pages that follow present perspectives, stories, and proposed solutions from a large number of people. To bound the case presentation to one or two narratives or 'cases' would severely limit the impact. This case presentation is therefore thematic, interweaving many stories, quotes, descriptions, and perspectives on career development and employability (in the postgraduate student / graduate context).

The reported research was conducted as a strategic priority project of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching between February 2015 and August 2016. Bond University was the lead institution, with partner institutions – *University of Southern Queensland*, *Victoria University*, and partner peak body organisations – *Australian Council for Educational Research* and *Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations*. All types and levels of postgraduates were considered (i.e. course-based, research, Masters, doctoral). Secondary research was conducted using data from three different national surveys. Results of the secondary analysis were specifically probed through primary research. Notably, the secondary analysis of national survey data painted a 'rosier' picture of postgraduate student experiences and perceptions than did this research, whereupon in-depth conversations were held with and between numerous postgraduate students and the university

staff who work with them. In total there were 366 primary research participants from across 26 Australian universities (319 students and 47 staff). Among the three methodological approaches of engagement breakfasts (7), interviews (82) and focus groups (9) there were 223 students, 38 students/44 staff and 58 students/3 staff research participants respectively.

Through the course of this work, an understanding of the 'postgraduate student experience' emerged and was conceptualised to describe the totality of students' involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment. The term encompasses students' (and their supervisors/educators) appraisal of, and engagement with, their methods of learning, affective response toward their course, interaction with the institution, sense of identity and belonging, support system (within and outside the university), and the contextual factors that assist or disrupt their progress – personally, academically, and/or professionally. The definition evolved from earlier work with research students (e.g., Leonard, Metcalfe, Becker, & Evans, 2006) to incorporate all forms of postgraduate study, whether that be research, coursework, or a mix of both. Notably, it reflects the journey of a student in multiple domains (e.g., academic, personal, professional, and social), and acknowledges the complexity and diversity of experiences cannot be synthesised into a universal definition.



There appears to be an assumption (reinforced throughout the research reported in this case presentation) in higher education that postgraduate employability will take care of itself. Beliefs about the postgraduate profile are that these students return to universities with work experience, clearly defined career goals, and established networks. Overall, universities therefore do not invest significant resources in developing career services and supports for the postgraduate context, and they do not consistently articulate and apply strategy to embed employability in postgraduate curriculum, assessment and/or research pathways.

Postgraduate students are increasingly vocal that:

- + they do have substantive employability needs,
- + necessary approaches and supports are different from those designed for undergraduate students,
- + universities are largely not performing due diligence to postgraduate employability.

Only 14 per cent (7 people) who expressed an opinion (51 people) among interviewed postgraduate students and university staff (82 people across Australia) are optimistic that postgraduates will secure related careers upon graduation. Fifty one per cent are pessimistic and the others neutral. Furthermore, 61 per cent (of the 71 people who expressed an opinion) believe that Australian universities need to improve postgraduate employability supports. The 17 interviewed PhD students did not feel that

universities effectively support the transition from postgraduate student to early career academic. The majority of recommendations to enhance employability (37 per cent) related to the provision of work opportunities whilst studying (embedded in curriculum and/or supported work experience and internships).

Analysis of focus groups revealed that career development and employability experiences and recommendations for improvements consistently emerged as primary themes. Many of the postgraduate students and staff who support them perceived a ceiling on their learning and graduate contribution, as they were not fully embraced as Australia's future knowledge resource (an aspirational concept which Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, call 'citizen scholars').

**Three overall recommendations emerged from the research and are detailed in this case presentation and sub-divided into specific recommendations for postgraduate students, educators and university leaders. It is recommended that:**

- + Employability is embedded in the everyday postgraduate curriculum and assessment.
- + Employability is made explicit to postgraduate students.
- + Postgraduate studies actively engage with industry to facilitate practical experiences.

Two exemplar university employability supports are highlighted in this case presentation to provide practice ideas for other universities to consider

- ⊕ The University College of London's supports for coursework students (or what is called – PGT – postgraduate taught students in the United Kingdom)
- ⊕ Queensland University of Technology's supports for Higher Degree Research (HDR) students

Six discussion questions emerged from the conversations with postgraduate students and university staff to suggest further research directions and to guide practice improvement. These questions are:

- ⊕ What national data collection and metrics can be used to analytically track the career development and employability of postgraduate students and employment outcomes of graduates? What mechanisms can be put into place to close-the-loop on this data to use an evidence-based approach to improving the overall postgraduate student experience?
- ⊕ Does today's employment / unemployment context necessitate postgraduate degrees? i.e. Is today's postgraduate degree equivalent in employment qualifications to yesterday's undergraduate degree? If this is the case, are graduates from postgraduate degrees obtaining what they need to be employable through these degrees?

- ⊕ Given that universities typically have a much higher proportion (and thus derived business income) from undergraduate students, how can these universities be persuaded to dedicate budget and other resources to improving services and supports for postgraduate employability?
- ⊕ How do employability needs, resources, services, and supports differ between undergraduates and postgraduates in diverse contexts?
- ⊕ What are the particular skills that are required by postgraduates in specific disciplines/contexts for heightened employability, and how can skills development be balanced with theory and forward-thinking for an overall quality of student experience and outcomes?
- ⊕ How can programmes and educators address the complexity of improving postgraduate student employability in disciplines/degrees which are generalist in nature and/or do not have defined career paths and outcomes for other reasons? For example, if industry experts are brought into the classroom, which ones are invited given that graduates will move on to a wide variety of careers?

# PROJECT KEYWORDS AND DEFINITIONS

**Citizen Scholar** is 'a student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of a society.' (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p. 1)

**Diversity** refers to implicit and explicit understanding that each student is unique. It is the notion that all postgraduate students have individual learning preferences, backgrounds, needs, and capacities, which need to be respected and valued to provide excellence and equity in higher education (Morgan, 2013).

**First Year Postgraduate Experience** describes the totality of students' experience with, and transition to, their higher education. Consistent with previous definitions of the FYE, which largely focused on the undergraduate context, it is acknowledged that this transition is often affected by social,

cultural, and situational factors, resulting in a multiplicity of first year experiences, with no common end-point to the transition (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Kift, 2009).

**Graduate Employability** means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition, and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011, Holmes, 2013, Kinash et al., 2015a; Kinash et al., 2015b; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

**Loneliness** is defined as a lack of contact with families (personal loneliness); loss of networks (social loneliness); separation from preferred culture or linguistic environment (cultural loneliness) (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).





**Learning Management Systems (LMS)** is a software application or web-based technology used to plan, implement, and assess a specific learning process. Typically, a learning management system provides an educator with a way to create and deliver content, monitor student participation, and assess student performance. A learning management system may also provide students with the ability to use interactive features such as threaded discussions, video conferencing, and discussion forums.

**Postgraduate Student Experience** describes the totality of students' involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment.

**Student Experience** can be defined as '...a phrase that encompasses not only the academic aspects of teaching, learning, and curriculum but also student lifestyle and extracurricular activities, academic

advice, support and mentoring, and work experiences' (Benckendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott, 2009, p. 84).

**Student Voice** is conceptualised as students' feedback and perceptions about their learning as essential in determining what support needs to be offered to them (Andrade, 2006; Novera, 2004).

**Transition Pedagogy** is 'a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and supports the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts' (Kift, 2009, p. 2).

**Work-study-life balance** is defined as a complex triad in which students simultaneously manage their occupational roles and obligations (paid or volunteer/ internship based), academic commitments (both research and/or coursework), and personal life responsibilities.





# CASE STUDY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall aims of this research project were to collect, collate, and disseminate postgraduate perspectives on their broad student experiences and the relationships of these experiences with learning. The project engaged students and higher education personnel to derive and disseminate good practice and practical strategies to impact and enhance Australian postgraduate student experiences.

**The specific aims and objectives of this case study are:**



## For Students

To suggest evidence-based approaches to planning, navigating, and prioritising their postgraduate student experiences for heightened employability.



## For Higher Education Staff (Academics and Executive Leaders)

To raise awareness of the common experiences of postgraduate students across Australia in the context of employability, and suggest evidence-based approaches to enhancing that student experience for improved employability and the fostering of 'citizen scholarship.'

# POSITIONING CHALLENGES / ISSUES

There appears to be an assumption (reinforced throughout the research reported in this case presentation) in higher education that postgraduate employability will take care of itself. Beliefs about the postgraduate profile are that these students return to universities with work experience, clearly defined career goals and established networks. Overall, universities therefore do not invest significant resources in developing career services and supports for the postgraduate context, and they do not consistently articulate and apply strategy to embed employability in postgraduate curriculum, assessment and/or research pathways.

Postgraduate students are increasingly vocal that:

- + they do have substantive employability needs;
- + necessary approaches and supports are different from those designed for undergraduate students;
- + universities are largely not performing due diligence to postgraduate employability.

To elaborate, many postgraduate students explain that they are returning to university to change careers and/or disciplines (i.e. broadening rather than deepening degrees) and therefore may not have relevant experience, skills, goals, and networks in the new domain. Despite these gaps, postgraduate students (as compared to undergraduate students) tend to be mature aged, have work experience (if in a different field/discipline), and therefore have further developed transferable skills, and a higher degree of complexity of roles and

competing demands (e.g. dependents and financial commitments). Furthermore, they tend to have higher developed intellectual or existential goals. Therefore, traditional career services extended to undergraduate students such as resume writing, career fairs and internships in entry-level positions are mostly inappropriate for postgraduate students.

Overall, postgraduate students in coursework programs report that employability is seldom discussed, relevant skills are not taught, and industry is rarely engaged. Postgraduate students in research modes report that they are not coached and supported to transition their student experience into careers. The most common career pathway/ambition from PhDs is into academic careers. PhD students report an unfulfilled pre-enrolment expectation that they would be formally supported to secure and manage careers as early career academics.

Given that the PhD studies are conducted out of the same employment site (i.e. universities) as the sought-after careers, many postgraduate students express surprise that the career transition is largely missing. PhD students may secure contracts as tutors and/or as research assistants, and sometimes receive professional development in teaching. However, beyond these mostly short-term roles, career development/counselling and networking programs to help graduates with PhDs to successfully navigate full-time continuing employment as early career academics seems to be largely non-existent.

The PhD students whose chosen career path is not in academe have other concerns. Postgraduate assignments seem to be almost exclusively of an academic nature (resembling journal papers with numerous in and end text references), resulting in minimal preparation and experience preparing other types of works (e.g. technical writing for industry).

A quote from a research paper on the postgraduate student experience summarises some of these issues.

“Students tend to enter into a research degree because of a genuine interest in research and a particular research topic, hoping that their research will make a contribution to society and under the premise that a Master’s degree by research or PhD will benefit their future career. Unfortunately, largely due to a lack of job security – “the postdoc treadmill” – pressures on early career researchers in academia and, more so for those entering industry, a lack of generic professional skills (for example, communication and presentation), the majority of science, engineering and technology (SET) postgraduates experienced an arduous task in securing employment.’ (Giles, Ski, & Vrdoljak, 2009, p. 82)

The issues highlighted by these researchers in the context of academic employability are that:

- + there are minimal suitable vacancies for graduates,
- + those who are hired as early career researchers meet with stressful conditions, and

- + employability skills beyond academic research are not sufficiently developed through postgraduate studies.

Three participants in the research reported in this document emotively expressed similar experiences and perceptions.

“I’ve had to make my own opportunities. There essentially was no career development that takes you from your degree into academia. Other than pushing someone off a cliff.’

“I would go anywhere where there’s a permanent position. However, I’ve been told by the workforce out there that I’m unemployable. So I’ve spent 10 years perfecting a CV that’s suited to academia, which essentially, I’m told that I can’t even get a job answering phones with.’

“Help with transition from PhD to academic – a large proportion of higher degree research students still want to follow this path and should be helped where possible. How do you get there? What skills do you need to do so? Where are your gaps in these skills and how can you work to achieve them? Also what I think would be great is also advice for females wanting to make this transition but also having to navigate the idea of beginning a family and how/when to fit this in to the transition.’

PhD graduates with academic aspirations are not the only postgraduate students experiencing employability challenges. Despite the growth of course-based postgraduate degrees in response to industry vacancies, employability remains problematic. Mistry, White, and Berardi (2009) described the discrepant perspectives and experiences of employers and academics in the fields of geography, and earth and environmental science.

“First, there is often conflict between what students, staff and employers perceive as “real world” skills. ... Thus there is a potential ethical conflict in what some employers need (for example, the fostering of conservative and neo-liberal goals through vocationally oriented education) and what academia wants to teach (the promotion of knowledge, skills and values that encourage social and environmental justice). This could potentially be reflected in the skills that employers require, e.g. oral communication, technical expertise, team and group working, and the skills that academia wants to teach, e.g. critical thinking, reflective practice, independence, applying knowledge.’ (Mistry, White, & Berardi, 2009, p. 124)

A PhD student who is also a part-time sessional university lecturer articulated related sentiment in an interview for the research presented in this document.

“The death of intellectualism, with more emphasis on job skills. It is not what university is meant to be anyways. Job skills should be on the job. University should really be about the pedagogical process and that is not our focus. As a result, academics are not given the opportunity to really showcase their skills within the university setting in a way that they should.’

Another postgraduate student research participant asked,

“Are we seeing people as our greatest asset and resource and treating them accordingly? Or are we seeing them as an objectified resource that is disposable? I think that is the early 21st-century question in the workplace across all domains.’



# NARRATIVE DEPICTIONS

*Four stories of postgraduate students who participated in this research are summarised here. These stories are illustrative of the recurrent issues emerging throughout the research. While these particular stories highlight the diversity of postgraduate students (gender, discipline, domestic/international, course/research-based), the depicted experiences and themes are not 'outlier phenomena' and as such, were echoed in various forms throughout the research. Each of the research participants reviewed and 'okayed' the narrative presentation, but remained de-identified to maintain confidentiality of themselves and their universities.*

## **Course-based male postgraduate student**

At one of the student engagement breakfasts, it was the overall consensus that career development and employability supports are seldom provided for postgraduate students, and when they are provided, it is the perspective of the participating students that services and supports have largely been designed for undergraduate students and do not meet the needs of postgraduates. One postgraduate student explained that he transitioned a mid-level career in the finance industry from full to part-time to commence postgraduate studies. In order to fulfil his program requirements for graduation, he was forced to quit his paid employment to commence an unpaid internship in an entry-level position. The other students at the breakfast were not surprised, sharing similar stories. Across breakfasts, many postgraduate students described career fairs and other university career events as 'wastes of time' because the employers who were present only had entry-level vacancies appropriate for graduates from undergraduate degrees.



# NARRATIVE DEPICTIONS



## **Course-based female Masters student in multidisciplinary degree**

One of the interviewed postgraduate students is nearing completion of a Masters degree that does not have a defined discipline and according to the interviewee 'is not part of any national agenda.' The degree is about change and complexity and her university supported her to personalise the degree in a bespoke manner, putting together units and research of her choosing. Her degree was coming together nicely until the key administrator went on maternity leave. As she nears graduation, she is increasingly concerned about graduate employment outcomes. She said that she and her postgraduate student peers rate the career counselling supports provided by the university 'poorly.' She believes that she will find her career search particularly challenging because of a high unemployment rate of graduates her age (under 30). Furthermore, she believes that postgraduate qualifications are no longer a differentiating feature and she believes that she may be forced to move overseas to find work. When asked what suggestions she has for university improvements to career development and employability supports, she replied that assessment should be practically applied (where appropriate) and that more internships would be beneficial.



# NARRATIVE DEPICTIONS



## **Course-based female Masters student (mother)**

Another of the interviewed postgraduate students is also pursuing a Masters degree in a course-based program. She has obviously put a great deal of thought into what postgraduate experience means to her, and three interactive themes emerged throughout her depiction. First, she believes that through postgraduate studies, students have the opportunity to develop their personhood, engaging in a rich process of self-discovery and self-development. She said, 'Postgrad study is more than just learning to get a better job. It's an existential process.' Second, she has a gestalt perspective on the postgraduate experience, in which the whole person and life experience is nurtured and supported. She said, 'Postgraduates do not split their work from their lives. Each is for enrichment of each other.' Third, she believes that effective postgraduate student experiences are highly social, community-based, and grounded in communal activity. Intertwining these three components, she used the example of regularly bringing her four young children on-campus, whereupon the university community welcomes and involves the children in the life of the university.

# NARRATIVE DEPICTIONS

## Research-based female international onshore student

Another student explained that her country of origin did not have the educational opportunities that she and her husband desired for themselves and their children. They researched many countries and chose Australia, believing that it is a 'nation of minds that can lead the world in research.' The family does not regret the move, but believes that Australian higher education can further improve. The interviewed student had expected to be valued and respected as a member of a national community of citizen scholars (as high-level occupation). Instead, she feels somewhat stifled, suppressed, and limited. Furthermore, she feels tired and described herself as 'struggling.' She has had to work full-time throughout her studies to support herself and her family, and her applications for scholarships were denied. She provided two poignant specific examples of unsatisfactory postgraduate student experiences. First, in order to match supervisors and research students, the students each prepared a poster and stood in front of it. The supervisors walked the line of displayed students and selected the ones they would add to their load. The students were not told about their prospective supervisors' credentials nor how the match would progress the students' research/career goals. Years into her degree, this student does not know the names or the research topics of the other students supported by the same supervisor, never-mind students in other disciplines or other universities. Second, one of her co-supervisors was away for an extended time and instead of contacting the student to consult about arrangements, she was sent an email that gave her a name of someone else appointed to cover the absence. The student's reaction was, 'Hang on. No! Not again. That is NOT going to happen to me again.' She believes that beyond graduate careers, through postgraduate studies, universities can 'empower our next generations to solve the problems of the planet.' However, universities are going to have to change in order to promote this higher level emancipating, intellectual potential.



# APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

Throughout the breakfasts, interviews, and focus groups, there was a central proposition that the onus of responsibility for employability is on the academics (including lecturers, tutors, and supervisors) who have direct day-to-day contact with the postgraduate students. The research participants placed less emphasis on university career development centres or their services (perhaps because these services and supports are already in existence at most universities). Research participants were concerned about the employability knowledge, skills and attributes that they felt should be developed within their subjects and/or supervised research experience.

The implicit recommendations/expectations were that:

## **1. Employability is embedded in the everyday postgraduate curriculum and assessment.**

### *From published research*

‘Developing teaching and assessment methods that further enhance a range of communication and team working skills and link to what employers want. For example proposal, briefing, and speech writing is achievable and the evidence from this study shows that this is already occurring in many Masters courses. Interestingly, however, we found that these transferable skills, in the majority, were only assessed informally. Formal assessment (i.e., marks that went towards final grades) was generally through assessment modes such as essays or more intensive written projects, possibly giving students the impression that skills such as oral communication and group working are

not as important. Numeracy, a skill which is in high demand by employers, was almost invisible within the summative assessment agenda of many Masters courses.’ (Mistry, White & Berardi, 2009, p. 143-144)

### *From an interviewed staff person*

‘Actual employers who nationally are going to drive the scope of practice of what they want in terms of their graduates. So what that does it is drives and defines into the future what jobs your graduates will be required to do. What we are then able to do is actually shape the nature of the workforce and then respond to that in terms of what is taught in the actual curriculum itself and the focus of the curriculum, whilst also responding to and being cognisant of the quality overlay from the national boards.’

### *From an interviewed staff person*

‘Small boutique bespoke courses that are driven, that are very responsive, that the curriculum is continually evolving. As the needs of the employer changes, the curriculum changes so we have very contemporary, responsive curriculum, and students feel that they are part of partnerships with their employers.’

### *From an interviewed staff person*

We find that we have much better value to students and to lecturers if we are in their curriculum, in-curriculum rather than generic extra-curricular stuff. Students don’t see the value coming along to an extra-curricular workshop, so to try and embed and integrate what we are doing into the curriculum.’

# APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

## 2. Employability and the concept of *citizen scholarship* are made explicit to postgraduate students.

### *From published research*

‘In many cases, students do not know or realize that what they have learnt within courses and through particular activities is what employers look for. Therefore, another step course directors could take is to make employability skills developed within courses more explicit to students. This could be done by stating various employability-related skills developed within course descriptions and/or through reflective sessions with students on their learning experiences and the link to future careers.’ (Murray, White & Berardi, 2009, p. 144)

### *From an interviewed postgraduate student*

‘About six months ago when I did my confirmation, during conversation with my two supervisors and the Head of School of Graduate Research, they asked me something very similar. They sort of said, “how can we improve the postgrad experience here? What do you guys want?” And so I was charged with going away and getting a list from all the postgrads in an area of things that would be helpful. And so what we came up with were actually all about employment. Talk to students about employment. Have seminars with real people talking about where they have gone after their PhD, not necessarily people in academia because we have got contact with them, but people who have gone interesting places or whatever. Not necessarily professional – “this is what I have done” – but

real people and other things like opportunities to organise speakers to get involved with organising conference or seminars. And realistic goals and expectations. What is an actual realistic timeframe? How long can we expect to be unemployed for? Some of those things because the gloss isn’t very helpful for us but I think a lot of that is done within our department.’

### *From an interviewed staff person*

‘Part of our responsibility as academics is to be able to carefully explain and to instil the confidence in our students that, okay it might be considered a fairly esoteric area of study that they are doing, but when they consider their analytical skills, their conceptual skills, their ability to communicate, their ability to write, their ability to work in a cross-cultural setting, they are all precisely the employment skills that the best employers are looking for.’

# APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

## 3. Postgraduate studies actively engage with industry to facilitate practical experiences.

### *From published research*

'Promoting vocational and placement opportunities can develop a wide range of skills employers are looking for ... and also providing students with opportunities to interact with alumni can be beneficial ... they are a great source of information on what employers really want.' (Murray, White & Berardi, 2009, p. 144)

### *From an interviewed staff person*

'Courses are valued in the workplace because they are linked to workplace increments based on your professional development through the industry. Students engage in their workplace and then are overseen by supervisors and preceptors actually in the workplace.'





‘AS THE NEEDS OF THE EMPLOYER CHANGES, THE CURRICULUM CHANGES, SO WE HAVE VERY CONTEMPORARY, RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM, AND STUDENTS FEEL THAT THEY ARE PART OF PARTNERSHIPS WITH THEIR EMPLOYERS.’



# EXEMPLAR UNIVERSITY EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORTS

## COURSEWORK POSTGRADUATES

### University College London's (UCL) careers support to enhance the employability of coursework postgraduates (Postgraduate Taught Students)

UCL has 14,713 postgraduate students which is the highest number from a single institution in the United Kingdom. Courses are largely one year in length and there are many niche courses. For example, there are approximately 45 coursework degrees newly introduced per annum. UCL designed three strategic support initiatives to improve the employability of coursework postgraduates and their graduate employment outcomes.

#### Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs)

This is a bespoke / personalised online pathway that provides an efficient way for postgraduate coursework students to career plan prior to enrolling in the course and to promote specialised postgraduate support available through the UCL Careers Centre. This initiative is similar to Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) in that the students study online, but unlike MOOCs there is a registration fee and clear credit pathway established. To date, 1500 students have engaged from 49 international countries. There are six careers and employability modules available to students, but they are not required to do all of them.

The six modules are based around questions:

- + Why do you need to think about your career right now?
- + What are your career options?
- + How do you write effective job applications?
- + How do you succeed in interviews and presentations?
- + How do you make useful contacts?
- + How will UCL Careers support you?

As evidence of the success of this initiative, 100 per cent of students completing surveys after completing SPOC indicated satisfaction. Two illustrative postgraduate student comments were:



'Very helpful, lots of information, very well put together – easy to understand. Keeps you interested with the variety of videos, PDFs, slides, and documents'



'This introductory course ... a fantastic and interactive way to improve my social network contacts or improve my interview skills when dealing with a job offer for instance.'

#### Intensive Support for Graduates

UCL has specialised services and supports for postgraduate coursework students offered through UCL Careers. All students can use UCL Careers for two years after graduation. There is additional service and intensive support for most 'at risk' departments. A specialised pilot of services for postgraduate coursework students was conducted in

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## EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORTS

2015. In the summer of 2015, telephone calls were placed to 2500 postgraduate coursework students to inquire into their employment status. Among these students, 41 per cent reported being unemployed. As a follow-on, eight departments/disciplines were chosen for intensive support based on a higher than average number of their students indicating being unemployed. The intensive support model included five components: a dedicated careers coach, proactive and regular contact with each graduate, one-to-one careers coaching, graduate workshops such as 'Building Resilience' and individual progress tracking. The postgraduate pilot is too new to have yielded outcomes. However, in equivalent initiatives with undergraduates in 2013 and 2014 unemployment fell from 17.9 to 8.4 per cent in the 'at risk' departments.

### On-Campus Activities

All departments/disciplines were surveyed to establish the level of provided and needed level of postgraduate coursework student careers provision, as well as whether these services and supports were and should be in-curricular or extra-curricular. Aims were to ensure coverage across all courses and share best practices between them. As a result, additional Central Careers workshops for postgraduate coursework students were run across the year. Four sample topics were:

- + Career planning
- + Applications
- + Interviews
- + Finding and Funding a PhD

Evidence of the success of this initiative was found in students 'voting with their feet.' For example, in October 2015 there were eight workshops with a total attendance of 957 coursework postgraduate students.

For further information about this suite of exemplar career development and employability initiatives for postgraduate coursework students, contact UCL Vice-Provost Anthony Smith or Karen Barnard, Director of UCL Careers.

# EXEMPLAR UNIVERSITY EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORTS

## RESEARCH POSTGRADUATES

### Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) career development initiatives to enhance the employability of Higher Degree Research (HDR) graduates

QUT recognises the need to address the employability and graduate outcomes of HDR graduates. To action this priority, QUT Careers and Employment has worked closely with academic and professional staff members to develop a number of initiatives to enhance the overall employability of QUT HDR graduates. Research has identified the increasingly competitive nature of academic careers, limitations in PhD programmes in regard to preparing candidates for academic careers, and the need to provide HDR graduates with opportunities to increase their transferable skills and employability for careers outside academia (Probert, 2014).

There are three main problems necessitating improvements to postgraduate employability supports.

- ⊕ The number of PhD graduates in Australia far exceeds the number of available academic vacancies (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015).
- ⊕ PhD graduates are lacking skill-sets that prepare them for positions outside academia.
- ⊕ Universities are not providing satisfactory career development programs to prepare PhD students for academic careers or careers outside academia (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015).

QUT Careers and Employment has developed ten specialised initiatives through multiple delivery modes, including online resources and training and individual counselling sessions. Half of these initiatives are facilitated directly through the careers service and their personnel, and the other half are embedded throughout the curriculum, across the university, and/or are directly facilitated by other areas of the university. This strategic whole-of-university approach to career services and employability is a vital component of QUT's impact on postgraduate employment outcomes. Beyond being an add-on service, employability is everyone's business at QUT and all students and staff collaborate to assure success.

### QUT Careers and Employment Initiatives

- ⊕ *Specialist postgraduate career counsellors* – QUT appears to be the only Australian university with multiple dedicated postgraduate career counsellors, all of whom hold postgraduate qualifications. Tailored assistance features longer individual and shorter walk-in career counselling sessions.
- ⊕ *Faculty-specific employability initiatives* – Briefings, workshops, lectures, seminars, forums, and networking events are customised for PhD students in particular disciplines/faculties.
- ⊕ *Career mentor scheme* – Through this initiative, students have the opportunity to meet with industry professionals for support in career development, networking, and transition from study to professional life.

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## EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORTS

- + *'Real World' placement program* – This initiative assists students with short-term, not-for-credit placement opportunities within industry and volunteer sectors. It also provides access to specialised career development workshops and peer/professional networking opportunities.
- + *Careers and employment services* – Online review resources, modules, and services are provided to postgraduate students to support career skills such as writing application letters, resumes, and selection criteria statements. In addition, students have access to a broad suite of experiential employment preparation workshops, including building a LinkedIn profile, networking, and preparing employment applications.

### **QUT University Initiatives (Facilitated beyond Careers and Employment)**

- + *Research student network (Student Support Services)* – Working in consultation with staff persons from Careers and Employment, staff from Student Support Services offer a series of workshops. Topics include: building an academic career, preparing for conferences, time management, careers outside academia and preparing for a job.
- + *Leadership, development and innovation program (Student Support Services)* – This is a comprehensive and customisable leadership and development program aimed at equipping students with practical skills

and experience. The program design is based on a Learn-Act-Lead model and formally recognises student learning and achievements through awards.

- + *Teaching advantage (Cathcart, Neale & Greer, Business School)* – This is a multi-award-winning, multi-mode program run by QUT academic staff. The overall aim is to facilitate vital teaching knowledge and enhanced skills in preparation for a university teaching career. Careers and Employment presents a career development and employability session as part of this program.
- + *Sessional career advancement and development program (Human Resources)* – This is a two-day program developed by Human Resources that has been recognised with multiple awards. Highly experienced QUT academics run sessions on building an academic portfolio (interweaving teaching, research and service). Careers and Employment facilitate career development and planning sessions throughout the program.
- + *eGradSchool (Offered to all HDR students in the Australian Technology Network)* – This online initiative is extended to QUT postgraduate students as well as those enrolled in any of the ATN universities. The overall goal is to enhance relevant professional and leadership skills. Topics include: entrepreneurship, leadership and communication, research commercialisation, project management, public policy, and global sustainability.



# EXEMPLAR UNIVERSITY EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORTS



Informal feedback indicates that students, graduates, employers, and staff are very satisfied with these new initiatives. These initiatives are currently being formally evaluated for their impact on employability and employment outcomes.

For further information about this suite of exemplar career development and employability initiatives for postgraduate research students, contact QUT Careers and Employment Service.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## For Postgraduate Students

The following recommendations are verbatim and paraphrased from the transcripts of interviewed staff and postgraduate students.

The research participants suggest that postgraduate students improve their employability by:

- + Undertake industry-related projects when you have a choice of assessment modes.
- + Find out about internships and work experience that your university offers and do them.
- + Study in teams with other postgraduate students. Establish networks while you are at university for future contacts, connectors, and clients.
- + Engage in extra-curricular activities, particularly leading student societies and/or contributing to your university by being the postgraduate student representative on university committees.
- + Get to know your professors and make sure they know you for future job leads.
- + Attend conferences and present your project and/or research work. Particularly try to participate in international conferences.
- + Try to get published while you are still a student.
- + Go to optional workshops, particularly if they are skills-based.

- + Be as interdisciplinary as possible. Ensure that you obtain a broad-base of study and knowledge.
- + Differentiate yourself and understand where you 'sit' in the world of research and/or practice.
- + Be confident and proud of your discipline of study.
- + Practice telling employers about all of the transferable skills that you have gained through postgraduate studies, like spoken and written communication, analysis, and team work.
- + Do your research on target employers and positions and be able to express why you want that job.

An extended quote from an interviewed student expands upon the final point.



'Some of the larger industry partners came in to just explain what they are looking for in a graduate and their number one thing was perhaps surprising to most graduates. It wasn't how well you did at Uni or what your marks were or how well you knew things. What they were after is someone with passion and enthusiasm who felt that they understood the job enough to say, 'Yes, I want to do this for the next few years.' It doesn't have to be a lifetime, but two or three years. So there is definitely a difference between what the university tells you to expect and what the industry want. If you're getting those skills, perhaps from industry, take-up networking opportunities with industry.'

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## For Educators

### **Embed employability in the everyday postgraduate curriculum and assessment.**

This means that employability goals should be aligned with and represented in the learning outcomes of postgraduate subjects and research workshops. Furthermore, the types and variety of assessment and feedback processes should be selected and designed to support the development of employability skills and attributes.

### **Make employability explicit to postgraduate students.**

Postgraduate students may be involved in career-related learning activities, but be unaware that they are advancing their employability. Explicitly identify and discuss employability throughout the postgraduate learning experience to support postgraduate students to build their career identity.

### **Design project-based work for postgraduate students.**

Whether postgraduate students are engaging in further study for purposes of broadening (i.e. branching into different fields, disciplines and/or careers) or deepening (i.e. extending their knowledge, skills, attributes, and identity in the same field, discipline, and/or career path), the experience of an undergraduate degree has developed their capacity for independent knowledge assimilation and thereby a need for further application and discovery. Students and staff throughout this research indicated that postgraduate

students thrive and that their employability is heightened when supervised in project-based activity, where they are 'hands-on' experimenting, doing, and self-discovering. Furthermore, these projects are said to be particularly beneficial when they are industry aligned, such as going out into the field and engaging in projects with/for employers, or when projects are designed to be authentic experiences of what graduates will be doing in their careers.

### **Actively engage with industry throughout postgraduate studies to facilitate practical experience.**

There are multiple means of engaging with industry throughout postgraduate experiences. Some examples derived from the research participants in the study reported in this study are listed below.

- ⊕ Include employers on panels to advance accreditation, course review, and curriculum development for new programs.
- ⊕ Invite employers and/or employed alumni as guest speakers for lectures, workshops, and online activities.
- ⊕ Co-mark assessment with employers.
- ⊕ Observe and shadow current roles and responsibilities in the workplace, and mirror these activities in tutorials, seminars, and assessment.
- ⊕ Host whole-of-program question and answer panels of employers to address maximising employability from the employer perspective and advise on career pathways.



- ⊕ Keep employer networks up-to-date to facilitate referrals for internships, project work, and graduate career opportunities.
- ⊕ Work closely with the University Career Development Centre to ensure that postgraduate needs (i.e. suitable employers and vacancies) are met through career fairs and other such events.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## For University Leaders

### **Explicitly identify postgraduate students in the context of employability within university-wide policy and strategic plans.**

In order for postgraduate employability to be improved, the recommendations made on the previous page should be undertaken by academics at every level and within every faculty and program of the university. Academics require executive leadership, direction, and support in order to put these recommendations into place and sustain them over time.

### **Design a formal academic development program for postgraduate students with academic career ambitions.**

Consistent with published research (Sutherland & Gilbert, 2013) the largest proportion of PhD students within the research reported in this document aspire towards academic careers. As described on the previous pages, nearly all of them felt that these career ambitions went largely unsupported by their institutions. This is peculiar given that the focus of training and development and the prospective employer are one and the same. Furthermore, a large proportion of these PhD students were previously working as sessional/adjunct academics for the same universities where they are now studying their PhDs.

Many articulated the goal of study as an attempt to accelerate/improve their careers and/or positioning – ‘PhD and publish OR perish.’ The most concrete aim of PhD completion was to be re-classified from a sessional/adjunct (with short-term contracts) to the professorial stream in a full-time continuing position, with better working conditions and rates of pay afforded to such positions.

A number of universities represented in this and published research (e.g. Hamilton, Fox, & McEwan, 2013) articulated strategies and supports for sessional/adjunct academics once contracted by the institution (i.e. typically identified as early career academic supports), but few seemed to have formal programs in place if the postgraduate students were not yet hired.

This is further complicated (and creates an imperative for a formal development program) in that a question with conflicting outcomes is whether people who take sessional/adjunct contracts are less likely to ever achieve full-time continuing professorial-track positions – ‘always a bridesmaid, never a bride’ (Dolan, Hall, Karlsson, & Martinak, 2013; Liftig, 2014; Mann & Hochenedel, 2003).

It was recommended multiple times throughout the research that universities develop graduate development programs or postgraduate students with academic career ambitions. Such programs could be modelled after those designed by multi-national corporations (MNCs) as described by Kinash et al. (2015b).

The fit between the MNC's formal graduate development programs and university formal academic development programs is appropriate in that in the former, people are accepted into the program without guarantee of employment.

The elements of formal programs that emerged in this research are:

- ⊕ Career advice and formal mentoring (e.g. when and which contracts to consider)
- ⊕ Teaching development (teaching theory, strategy ,and pedagogy)
- ⊕ Research skills and navigation (including how to plan research for strong metrics and impact)
- ⊕ Networking and introduction to future employers and opportunities

Notably, it is important to personalise employability and career supports for postgraduate students who do not wish to pursue academic careers. The profiles and ambitions of the current cohort need to be carefully considered so that, for example, not all assessment is designed as academic papers.




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For further information & resources:

 <http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com/>

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*The following discussion questions derived from the conversations with the 366 participants in the research described in this document. The research team did not commence the inquiry into career development and employability of postgraduate students with these questions in mind and therefore did not specifically ask or probe these questions. The questions emerged out of the research and thus serve as recommendations for further research. They can also be used to lead discussions, focus groups, and task-forces to further investigate and determine strategic action improvements to career development and employability supports for postgraduate students in university contexts.*

- + What national data collection and metrics can be used to analytically track the career development and employability of postgraduate students and employment outcomes of graduates? What mechanisms can be put into place to close-the-loop on this data to use an evidence-based approach to improving the overall postgraduate student experience?
- + Does today's employment / unemployment context necessitate postgraduate degrees? Specifically, is today's postgraduate degree equivalent in employment qualifications to yesterday's undergraduate degree? If this is the case, are graduates from postgraduate degrees obtaining what they need to be employable through these degrees?
- + Given that universities typically have a much higher proportion (and thus derived business income) from undergraduate students, how can these universities be persuaded to dedicate budget and other resources to improving services and supports for postgraduate employability?
- + How do employability needs, resources, services, and supports differ between undergraduates and postgraduates in readers' contexts?
- + What are the particular skills that are required by postgraduates in the readers' disciplines/contexts for heightened employability, and how can skills development be balanced with theory and forward-thinking for an overall quality of student experience and outcomes?
- + How can programmes and educators address the complexity of improving postgraduate student employability in disciplines/degrees which are generalist in nature and/or do not have defined career paths and outcomes for other reasons? For example, if industry experts are brought into the classroom, which ones are invited given that graduates will move on to a wide variety of careers?



